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Soviet Nuclear Edge in Mid-80's Is Envisioned by U.S. Intelligence

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WASHINGTON, May 12 — American intelligence services have concluded that in the next few years the Soviet Union could achieve an edge over the United States in every major measure of strategic nuclear power, including overall numbers of missile warheads, Carter Administration aides said today.

The aides said that the projection was one of the principal findings of a national intelligence estimate completed by the Central Intelligence Agency and other Government intelligence bureaus. The estimate is now being circulated among high-level policy makers and has been presented to President Carter.

According to officials familiar with the document, the Soviet Union, in the absence of the new nuclear arms treaty, could possess a missile arsenal in 1985 capable of delivering as many as 16,000 nuclear warheads against the United States. Officials estimate that the United States, in the same year, is likely to have a missile force equipped with about 8,000 warheads.

Debate Over Numbers

Some military experts contend that both Washington and Moscow possess so many nuclear warheads that comparisons of total numbers does not make much difference. However, American officials have traditionally pointed to Washington's lead in warheads to argue that Moscow has not surpassed the United States in strategic power.

Moreover, some academic specialists believe that growth in the numbers of Soviet nuclear warheads in the coming decade could neutralize the Administration's plans for building a new mobile missile, the MX.

While other aspects of the intelligence estimate have apparently caused disputes, the projections on warhead numbers have been welcomed by diverse elements in the Government.

Importance of Arms Pact

Proponents of arms control in the White House and the State Department said the estimate demonstrated the importance of approving the strategic arms pact, which would place limits on numbers of Soviet warheads. The treaty, signed June 18, 1979, was before the Senate when the Soviet Union intervened militarily in Afghanistan. The Administration then asked that consideration of the pact be postponed as part of its effort to induce Moscow to withdraw its forces.

At the Pentagon, officials said the report strengthened their case for deploying the Air Force's new MX mobile missile, which would give American forces an additional 2,000 warheads in the late 1980's.

Other defense aides said that Moscow's growing nuclear arsenal, set against

sign a smaller portion of American missiles against targets in China and a larger number against the Soviet Union.

The balance in strategic forces has been gradually shifting against the United States since the late 1960's, when Moscow initiated programs to deploy new land- and sea-based ballistic missiles. During the 1970's, the Soviet Union was able to establish an edge in such measures of strategic power as overall numbers of missiles and long-range bombers and the total payload that these systems can carry.

Clear U.S. Advantage in Numbers

But the United States, with a larger part of its missile forces equipped with multiple warheads, possessed an advantage over the Soviet Union in the 1970's in the number of nuclear weapons that could be delivered by the two sides' forces. Accordingly, in the annual Defense Department report in January, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown said that Washington possessed a total force of about 8,000 warheads on its land- and sea-based missiles, compared with 6,000 for Moscow.

Officials said that over the next five years the American total was unlikely to change significantly. In 1985, they said, the land-based missile force would be equipped with about 2,100 warheads while sea-based rockets would carry about 5,700 warheads.

3,000 More U.S. Warheads

Air Force bombers, they added, could deliver another 3,000 nuclear weapons, consisting of bombs and air-launched cruise missiles.

During the same period, the officials said, the intelligence estimate reports that without the new arms pact Moscow could put as many as 11,000 warheads on its existing force of 1,400 land-based missiles, and as many as 5,000 additional warheads could be fitted to Moscow's 950 submarine-launched rockets by 1985.

Together with about 1,000 weapons that could be carried by Soviet bombers, the intelligence group's "high estimate" for Soviet warheads in 1985 is 17,000, officials said.

The officials said that if the new arms treaty was finally ratified, this total could be cut by about half. By placing a ceiling of 820 on land-based missiles equipped with multiple warheads and by freezing numbers of nuclear bombs that could be placed on individual missiles, the new accord, officials said, would permit Moscow to deploy only about 8,500 warheads through 1985.